

Self Help

Katie Munyan

2017 Short Story Competition Winner

1.

I was disappointed after the funeral. The things people gave me evinced such a total incomprehension of what I might find comforting. Not that I wanted or expected anything at all, but the gifts corporealized yet another lack, whether it was lack of understanding or caring or both. Mostly, there were flowers, although those I discount as intended as some fashion of offerings for Alison. Clearly for me, there was the unidentifiable morass of casseroles and the unsolicited books: from the straightforward (*You're a Widower Now*) to the ambitious (*Growing Through Grief*) to the having-it-all (*Living without Letting Go*) to the suspiciously suggestive (*Coping with Regret*). I see my living room then as the full circle of life: the tables of leftover funeral home flowers, crispy white, dying, the small shelf of self-help books growing, the ones given to me alongside the ones Alison had bought herself at one point or another.

I used to tease Alison (she might have said, criticize, but, really, it was tease): if you could actually help yourself, you wouldn't need to buy something else to do it. Now I have my own collection, foisted upon me and likely to be donated soon, but still mine for the moment. I suppose I would be helping myself by buying the book to help me, but it's a dismal statement on our society if my ultimate act of personal agency is a purchase, if we're measuring personal growth in receipts.

Thoughts like these are why I can't sleep at night. Thoughts like these are why no one should sleep at night.

[Type text]

“Why don’t you try picturing the thought and imagining it getting smaller and smaller until it disappears and your mind is blank? And if it comes back, just keep doing that until the thought disappears for good,” Jennifer said.

“Why don’t you try prescribing me a sleeping pill?”

“David, I’ve told you, I’m not a psychiatrist. I can’t prescribe meds.”

“I suppose beer and Dramamine work too.”

She said that she’d see me next week.

2.

The sessions with Jennifer began three months after Alison died. Pancreatic cancer. We found out one week; the next, she was dead. Kyle was traveling and did not make it in time to see her alive. He came for the funeral and left with the ashes. I had been back at work for a few weeks before my boss suggested that I consider seeing someone. The whole thing couched in careful passive voice, his eyes darting as he spoke to whatever online legal guide was doubtless pulled up on his browser, but clear enough that it was the kind of suggestion to be complied with. At my age, it only takes one misstep to give oxygen to their desperation to push you out, replace you with someone younger, cheaper.

Not that I was particularly resistant to an hour a week sitting on a couch rather than sitting at my desk. I fell on the negative side of indifferent to most things, which was not new since Alison died. She had often commented on it.

Jennifer looked in her late-twenties. She had dirty blonde hair and a soft manner that seemed to fold-in on itself like a failed yeast dough. I imagined that she had recently graduated from some huge state university, majoring in psychology because she vaguely wanted to be in a health field but did not have the commitment or intelligence to sustain pre-med class work. There were no diplomas displayed in the office, only generic blots of office-art ranging in intended mood from merely inoffensive to attempts at calming, at their most ambitious.

[Type text]

The clinic questionnaire allows me to rate my mood in number of happy faces and assess my potential for self-harm in numbers one through ten, with one as “never consider it” and ten as “think about it daily.” I suggest the next edition of the form rate suicidal tendencies in number of knives. I also suggest number of nooses, but this is a joke.

Jennifer makes notes on a legal pad housed in a padded black binder. Her head nods and bobs like she is trying to put me at ease, but I see that it is herself she’s trying to comfort. She keeps her child hands pressed on her knees, as if napping off sweat.

I try to lighten the mood: I ask her if she advertises. I see those stickers occasionally on bathroom stall doors that say, “Feeling blue? Call for help,” above a phone number. The ones by the lock, eye-level when you sit on the toilet seat. Why put them there? Were there that many people who realized that they were depressed as they sat in public toilets? Or was it good real estate for advertising generally and, if so, why not widespread cross-industry adoption?

Jennifer doesn’t advertise. She declines to speculate further.

3.

I met Alison on a website for singles over forty. She lived an hour and a half away. The first time we met, we each drove halfway to an IHOP at one of the freeway exits. Alison ordered crepes with orange marmalade globbed on top. I can’t stand those standardized mass-market breakfast chains with their gummy pancakes and solidified hollandaise; I ordered a chef salad. I tipped 25% so that she would not think I was stingy.

The second time, I drove all the way to where she lived, which was a little town, more run-down than quaint. We went to a diner and she would not let me come to her house, even after that drive. She said she had had bad experiences that way. I didn’t ask. I had heard those stories enough times from other women. I was too old to have a particular agenda or to be surprised when it didn’t come to pass.

[Type text]

The third time, she came to visit me. I planned a beef tenderloin with horseradish glaze, but the oven thermometer was off, the meat pink beyond excuse. Alison suggested putting it in the microwave to finish it off, an embarrassment and a general travesty to the tenderloin, but she was right.

“Please, you’re the guest,” I told her, attempting to edge her out of the kitchen as she unceremoniously dumped the tenderloin onto a microwave-safe plate. “Anyhow, I’m used to doing it myself.”

“But it’s better this way, isn’t it?” she said, studying the menu of microwave settings as if there could be no debate.

She insisted on helping with dishes after dinner. I never would have normally allowed a guest to help, but I felt I had lost some claim to the territory after the microwave incident – it was her dinner too at this point. She stood beside me, stacking and scraping, while I washed and I felt her warm shoulder press against mine, her body planted firmly beside me, the after-dinner routine the same and not the same at all.

Women think that they are the only ones with real ideas of romance, but men have them too. I think men feel it more. Women always look for romance in what’s ahead, always anticipatory, but men can feel a complete whole feeling in a moment, unsinged by any expectation.

4.

I consider myself as well-prepared as the next person to trade mundane pronouncements about death. I was not prepared to describe Alison, to give some extemporaneous account of her that was distinct from, but also part of, some similarly ill-considered account of myself. How could anyone see it as a failing that I never envisioned this psychology trainee

[Type text]

fixing her blank, practically-adolescent eyes on me, asking me to say something about Alison.

I talk to Jennifer about work. I talk about the house, which I increasingly see as the same. It was my house for decades before Alison. My routines. We never combined our laundry. I kept doing mine on Thursday nights, she did hers I don't know when. I did the cooking. Alison could only make casseroles, pot roasts, muddled unimaginative holdovers from our childhood.

I thought I could at least talk with Jennifer about the funeral. But, when I think about the funeral now, all I can think about were hands. Big hands, small hands, bony hands that prod, soft well-insulated hands, cool dry hands, the uncomfortably moist, the outright-wet, all pressing into mine, over and over. The hands, and Alison's third-cousin or fourth-cousin or maybe a niece fluttering, repeatedly apologizing that her knee-high daughters didn't have anything black to wear.

I certainly do not tell Jennifer that I can already imagine Alison's face fading in the next few years. It hasn't yet, but I can see that it will. There's a haziness around her when I think about her in general, like a halo, but a halo of forgetfulness. Yet I still see my mother all the time so vividly that I can almost smell her breath. When I am in the kitchen cooking breakfast, I hear her standing behind me, cursing at me, telling me I am scrambling the eggs too hard and sometimes I answer her right back as if she's there.

I wonder if Kyle will see Alison the same way – not in character, my mother and Alison were nothing alike – but with the same physicality, the same unsolicited unfading presence. Is it the burden of every child or only something generated by physical closeness, by the frictions of seeing each other regularly, and, if that, will Alison have anyone to remember her like that at all?

5.

[Type text]

Jennifer gives me homework. At first, she's ambitious. Grief charts, cognitive behavioral categorization of my emotions. I tell her that's not what I'm there for. I'm there for straightforward, practical solution. I'm there because it was suggested. I'm there to smooth things over, not overturn them more.

"If you're going to give me something, give me something concrete."

"Think about finding new areas for growth in your life. Pick up a new hobby or restart an old one. Join a group of people who are interested in the same thing."

"I'm not a joiner."

"Do something by yourself then. Garden. Read." As if she spends her weekends in rubber clogs, scraping dirt under her sloppy French manicure. "Hobbies are concrete. Expanding who you are through what you choose to do. Giving yourself a way to get to know yourself as you are and as you might be after a major life change."

I let my eyes drift to the ceiling and groan, just muffled enough to be communicative but not overly confrontational. It doesn't faze her. I shift to return her gaze squarely and see that in fact she is not looking at me at all, but just above my head out the window behind me.

Everything she says is clichéd, but she is not as nervous as I first thought. I might even call her self-possessed. And at least her clichés weren't silly, to the degree that was possible. Even when I was younger, I couldn't stand silly girls, with their empty bubbling laughs that cushioned them like airbags.

6.

Kyle was seventeen when Alison and I got married. Most of the first year he spent out of the house or in his room. Then he went to college and moved away.

I admit that I did not anticipate Kyle as I should have done. Alison and I only dated for eight months before we married; it was a few months before I met Kyle, although she told me about him right away. I never thought about where he was when she spent the
[Type text]

night. I vaguely remember her worrying about whether to let him stay alone in the house or make him go to his father's when we went to the mountains for our first weekend away together. I don't remember what she decided and whatever it was must have set the precedent because I don't think she mentioned it any other times that we went away. Kyle seemed fuzzy and abstract to me then, more of an academic question than a physical person. Even after I met him, slumping, morose, silent at best and amateurishly condescending at worst, making every effort at establishing himself as an unremarkable teenager, he did not seem of enough substance to be intrusive. When I saw Alison then, I glowed with the flattering surprise of her bond to me, thought nothing of her bond with him.

It became clear after the wedding. I wasn't good with Kyle and we all knew it, although no one ever said anything. We never fought openly. I snapped sometimes. I made it clear, without saying much. With Kyle out of the house, Alison and I could relax into our new pattern. I cherished our comfortable conversations, relished her quiet affirmation and care. Kyle disrupted all of that. When Kyle was in the house, something in Alison was always turned towards him, even when she was facing me.

Kyle did not come back to visit much after he left. He called Alison once a week or so. He spent most breaks traveling or staying with friends. She had five or six albums full of his baby and kid photos that she kept under the coffee table, and she would thumb through them some afternoons. She smiled, but later I would hear her crying in the bedroom. I heard her, but I pretended not to, not because I didn't care, but because she didn't appreciate what I had to say. Eventually, she put the albums in the basement.

"Just call Kyle. If you want to talk to him, just call him," I told her.

"I want to give him his space," she said. "He'll call when he's ready."

"Don't put up with this. Tell him to visit."

Kyle married a few months after he graduated college like some kind of born-again. I had never suspected that Kyle might be interesting before he married June. She was nothing like his slinky, affected high-school girlfriend or the indistinguishable girls that he always had

[Type text]

with him when we saw him the first years of college. June was tall and broad-shouldered with a wide plain face. Generally quiet, but direct when she spoke, sometimes brusque, never seeking to charm or amuse. Already at twenty-two the kind of person you could imagine never acknowledging a regret, not because she would not make mistakes, but because she would refuse to disown them.

I spent the whole wedding wondering who this stepson was who could attract this girl's attention and recognize that it meant something worthwhile. Either I didn't know Kyle at all, or June didn't. Either was possible, both were likely. That first year after Alison and I married, our one year the three of us in the house, for all the anticipation of change, we had remained like islands, or ships passing in the night, or maybe more like a patch of tiny blisters, each of us little pockets of our own individuated pains pressed right next to each other but never quite touching.

Once Kyle married, they did all holidays with her family. Alison would go for a week at Christmas. I went once, but stayed home the next year, which turned out to be the last year.

7.

I intended to ignore all of Jennifer's suggestions, not as a matter of principle but because I did not find them interesting. However, I was bored. Some days, I even regretted not getting the dog Alison had wanted ever since Kyle moved out. I was still boxing up Alison's stuff up to send to Kyle. The furniture he wanted had gone in a moving van. I was left sorting through pictures and papers scattered in every room. My goal was two boxes a week. Kyle perhaps should have done it himself, but he had to be back at work. I had never done much for Kyle, so it seemed reasonable to do this last thing, and to spare us both embarrassment of him rummaging through the house.

I did start to read more, fiction mostly. Alison read a lot, all terrible stuff, self-help books and romance novels and simple popular fiction. I wrote technical manuals for home [Type text]

appliances; she always wanted me to read more and I told her I read all day. She gave me a book to read once, one of her favorites she said, but I kept pointing out to her the parts that didn't seem right, and asking her questions about why it was written this way, why this happened. I had been an English major in college; it was hard to talk about the books she read.

"Fine, don't read it," she said.

"I was just getting into it," I told her. I was just offering some critical thinking questions.

Because of, despite of, Jennifer's suggestion, I began reading short stories. I found I could not muster the attention for novels. Too many pages, and my mind would drift off and I could not pull it back again. That was a frightening feeling. Short stories let me focus. I could read them quickly, and then move to the next one and refocus there. Reading more surprised me. I was surprised by the stories about conjoined twins: I suppose that I only encountered two or three stories, but, given the rarity of conjoined twins in life and in my own thoughts, that seemed like a lot. The stories were all from the perspective of the passive twin too, the one that got drawn along on the other's sexual misadventures (one twin always seemed prone to sexual misadventures). No one ever wrote from the active twin's perspective. And no one touched the perspective of the conjoined twin's lover from a ten-foot pole, as if such a person could exist but not be understood. It seemed to me that was the story: the lover made a choice to be there, the passive twin didn't. Why chose that when there were so many other people out there, so many others with fewer complications, to love? That was what I wanted to know, but no one tried to answer that.

8.

[Type text]

One trouble with Alison: she didn't have high enough standards for her friends. She lowered herself with the women who hung around her and she didn't even realize it.

Alison's friends - she had two close ones, Maureen, the big one with glasses, and Jeanne, the little over-exercised strung-out one - used to come over and just give me a look, the kind women do when they don't want to give you enough leverage to accuse them of being rude, but want to get the message across, all the same. They'd stand in the kitchen, talking for hours and requisitioning my mezze plates for ashtrays, and then look at me like I was the intruder when I came in. Alison had rearranged all the cabinets how she liked them, even though she hardly cooked, and I'd end up struggling to find something, swearing out of all sense of proportion, just driven by anxiety to get out of there, my own kitchen. Alison would flush and Maureen/Jeanne would grind their cigarettes into the mezze plates on the counter, muttering, I don't know how you put up with him, as if I wasn't right there.

Alison only smoked when they were there. For all that women complain about men becoming different people around their friends, women do it just as much. That was the kind of hypocrisy that rankled me when I was younger, that I saw everywhere and thought I could never resign myself to. I never thought that I'd get married. I suppose I could have when I was younger, but I never wanted to. I was always upfront about it, with any woman I went out with, and they hung around until they figured out that I was serious and then they moved on. There was nothing they could say about it with any moral weight, because I had told them the truth from the get-go. Then when I was older, before Alison, I thought of the online dating as a way to pass time, a hobby almost.

"You know you didn't have to get married again. You've been married once already. You didn't have anything to prove to anybody," Maureen said once to Alison when I was barely out of the kitchen. It was just about a year and a half after we had gotten married, just after Kyle had moved out.

I went to the living room and pressed myself into my armchair, cranking up the TV so that I wouldn't have to hear. I didn't need to hear. When I saw them pass on their way
[Type text]

out, I got up and graciously walked Maureen to the door, thanked her for visiting and told her to drive safely. I stood in the doorway to watch her on the way to the car. She wouldn't look back because I'd made my point. At the end of the day, she was the one who had to leave and I was the one who stayed.

Eventually, Maureen stopped coming around so much and then not at all.

"I don't know what you saw in them," I told Alison.

"We sympathize with your loss. We lost Alison years ago," Maureen said to me at the funeral.

9.

There are four men my age that come to the grief support group regularly. They are the full spectrum of widowers, at least as I would have imagined widowers if widowers were something that anyone bothered to imagine. Luke talks incessantly about going out, about being a single man again, just enough to embarrass everyone with what a show it was. He really just goes on occasional internet dates. None of us are young enough or wealthy enough to pick up the women that we pretend are at bars, just waiting for us to get through our grieving. George is the consummate codependent; doubtless, he'd be married again in a year. Terry, I never heard say anything religious, but I always picture as a round little minister, dabbing sweat off his forehead after a feel-good sermon about how God is like the man who mows his grass for his neighbor even though he doesn't have a riding mower. Terry tells constant anecdotes of the most sanitized Hollywood movie marriage imaginable, mourned everything about it, said he went to the mall, just to walk around like he had with his wife, and broke down crying in the food court. I amuse myself by imagining his wife was really a documentary filmmaker who eschewed the concept of capitalism.

Jack seems normal enough, like the type I might be able to share these observations with, but he never raises an eyebrow at the others, never gives any inclination of being open

[Type text]

to a knowing look, which I find a continual humiliation – either he doesn’t notice the others’ eccentricities or he sees me as one of them, not one like him.

We usually meet at a coffee shop, but Terry invites us over after a couple months of meetings for beers. Not adult beers, just Bud Light. We have barely opened them when he toddles dramatically to the TV and popped in *The First Wives Club*.

“How long has it been since you’ve had to watch a chick flick? His face shiny and a shade redder than usually, he nearly glows with glee.

“I guess we are the dead wives club,” I say. His little face flushes even redder. I sip the beer and grimace before I notice the rest of the room on pause.

“I know your heart is in the right place, but, sometimes, you go too far,” Terry says, each word slow and careful as if he is reciting from memory. His face droops and he suddenly seems much older. He is still holding the DVD cover in the air with a flourish and I can’t help noticing that he looks like a mournful clown.

The other men watch me, waiting. I shrug. I had heard it before, from people who mattered more.

Jack comes up to me as we are leaving after the movie.

“Why not skip the Christmas potluck? Just give everyone a few weeks before you come back.” He says softly, confidentially, in the hallways as he walks me out.

He claps a hand on my back like some hearty former rower, and I realize that I was wrong: we never would have gotten along after all.

10.

I don’t want to go straight home after group and straight into the boxes for Kyle or the TV. The silence, except for the voicemail beeping. Some of Alison’s family and colleagues are still checking in, depositing awkward messages to be noted and returned or forgotten. June keeps leaving messages this week to call. She’s plaintive and hard to ignore in the way of [Type text]

only the truly earnest, but I have. I know she's calling to invite me to Christmas and I dread saying no when we both know that I don't have other plans. I'm surprised Kyle didn't convince her not to call, but, on the other hand, I can't imagine Kyle mustering the comparative moral weight to convince June of anything now that she is past whatever hormonal rush of romance walked her down the aisle.

The bar is one of those national chains that they cover with local paraphernalia and various detritus to create an atmosphere like a sad lampoon of a neighborhood dive. I avoid these places as a rule, but it's on the way home from Terry's and it's big enough to have something on tap that an adult might drink to cleanse the Bud Light aftertaste.

It's a long, crowded bar, and I'm on my second IPA before I realize that Jennifer is sitting a few stools down from me. There was a loud group between us, but I think she must have seen me. She is frowning down at the bar and tapping her fingers sharply on the words imprinted there as if reminding herself of something. The wooden bar has the names of its beers printed on it in dark black, imitations of names carved onto old tables, except they're printed not carved and the names are brands. I remember again how much I hate these bars.

She is sitting alone. I imagine that she has been left, but maybe she is waiting for someone or maybe she just comes by herself. I would respect that, or would if she looked more content.

It's never occurred to me that I might see her out in the world. Seeing her here, she looks even more young and slight and just like anyone else than usual. I feel it like a slap that she can assert such authority, not so much in suggesting things for me to do, but in refusing to take my words in the way that I intend them, instead overturning them to find things that I have not offered.

Other relationships grow upon a foundation of give and take: you toss out a scrap to test if the other person will respond in kind, you see what they do before you venture something else. You learn that your whole life. It's the only real way to protect yourself. Then, you ask for help, you go to a professional, and the whole model's thrown out. It
[Type text]

overwhelms me with how unfair it is, how immoral to confront the most vulnerable, the grieving, with this social unnaturalness on top of everything else.

I imagine saying this to her. I haven't felt angry since Alison died, ironic since anger might have been what she described as my primary character trait. I don't go over, though. Even I know: an angry young man might be exciting or misunderstood. But an angry old man at a bar is just a creep.

11.

I drive home slowly. The snow bucks and kicks under the car. Bleary, drunk enough to be in a comfortable haze, like my headlights are the warm glow of a candle instead of gasoline-fueled tunnels through the night. A line of green stoplights all the way to the green light on my answering machine. I sit in the chair beside the machine, grab a pen and the pad of post-its, my senses still comfortably dulled. It's Kyle this time.

"Don't send a box to the house this week. I'm staying somewhere else, I'm sorting it out. Yes, it's permanent. Yes, it's my fault. Yes, it's what you think. June probably called you and told you already. I know what you'll say, you made your bed, yeah, yeah, yeah. And I am lying in it, so don't bother." He hangs up. I am still poised, holding the pen. I look up and there are Kyle and June staring back at me, Alison and myself there, too.

I pick up the photo. It was their wedding day. I wasn't smiling, not because I was unhappy but because I can never smile for photos, the weight of the expectation pulls my lips down. Alison was beaming, the way I remember her when we first met, a way that even I could see was rare by then. Kyle smiled lopsidedly, careless, looking to the side, which I had never noticed before but would have attributed to his normal twitchiness if I had, and now already I couldn't resist the revisionist interpretation — that he was restless already. June, hair done and made up, looking beautiful in the way of even the plainest brides. She stared straight at the camera, unsmiling but open, equally glowing and grave.

I wish I could ask her, would she do it again, if she had known how it would be?
[Type text]

[Type text]